

Romania

The wait was worth it. First booked for 2020, postponed to 2021 due to covid, then again postponed to 2022, the long wait only increased the anticipation. David and I arrived in the Romanian capital Bucharest on 1 Sept 2022, 2 days before the Adriatic “Romania to Istanbul” tour started, and took the opportunity to explore this interesting city of 1.8 million people.



Palace of the Parliament, Bucharest

First call was the Palace of the Parliament, built by the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu between 1984 and 1997, the second largest administrative building in the world after the US Pentagon. It is home to the Romanian Parliament and Senate as well as housing three museums.

Unfortunately for Ceausescu he never lived to see the finished product, overthrown in the Romanian Revolution of 1989 and executed on Christmas Day of that year.

Unfortunately for us, the Palace was closed to visitors during our time there. Also targeted for a visit was Ceausescu’s extravagant private home, but we found out too late that tickets needed to be purchased 24 hours in advance. We settled for external views of the Palace, walks around the old town, rides on the metro and the modest train museum.

Tour briefing was held in the starting hotel on Sat 3 Sept, the group consisting of two American couples, another American, a Finnish couple and an Australian couple, plus David and myself. Tour guide was Mitja and van driver was Matez, the guide from my South East Europe tour earlier this year. Bikes were primarily BMW R1250GS and F750GS, with a BMW F900XR, a Yamaha MT-07 and a Ducati Multistrada for a bit of variety.

On the bikes by 8:30am next morning, the light Sunday morning traffic helping to get past the first 20km of city and suburbia and onto secondary roads towards Transylvania. It was cold and foggy for a while but cleared by mid-morning, and I was surprised to see far more BMW, Mercedes and Audi cars than the donkey and cart combinations I had been expecting to see. Mind you, some drivers acted as though a donkey was making the driving decisions.



a foggy first day on the bikes

Stray cattle and stray dogs were also a challenge, especially on mountain passes where the cattle invariably grazed on the exit of u-turns. Lunch was taken in a roadside restaurant not far from Bran Castle, the supposed setting for Irish author Abraham (Bram) Stoker's horror novel Dracula. As expected, the castle was very busy and very touristy, but certainly worth the stop.



blood pressure on the rise approaching Bran Castle

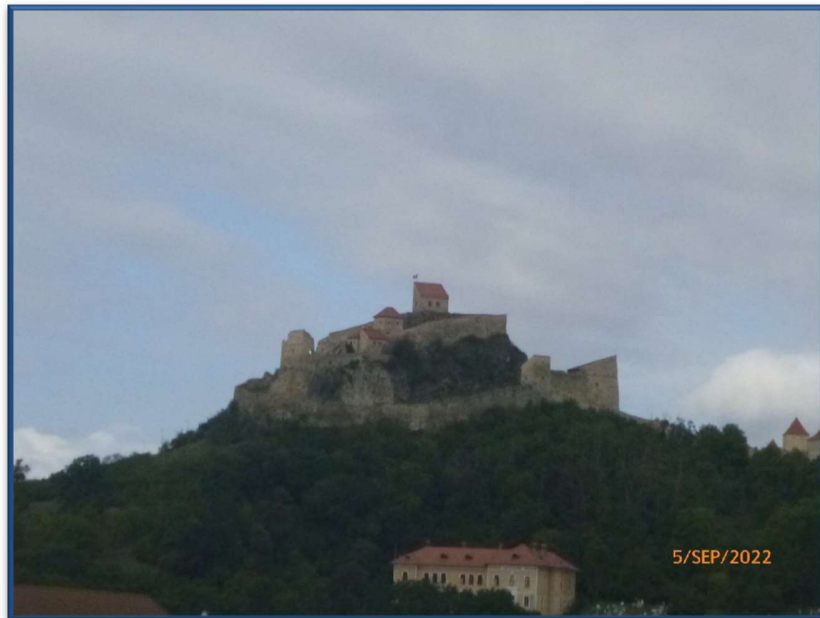


Bran Castle



the Romanian countryside

The afternoon ride was very enjoyable, passing around the edge of the Carpathian Mountains towards our stay in Brasov. Road surfaces were fairly good, traffic was average and more stray cows, dogs, and donkey & cart combinations kept us on our toes.

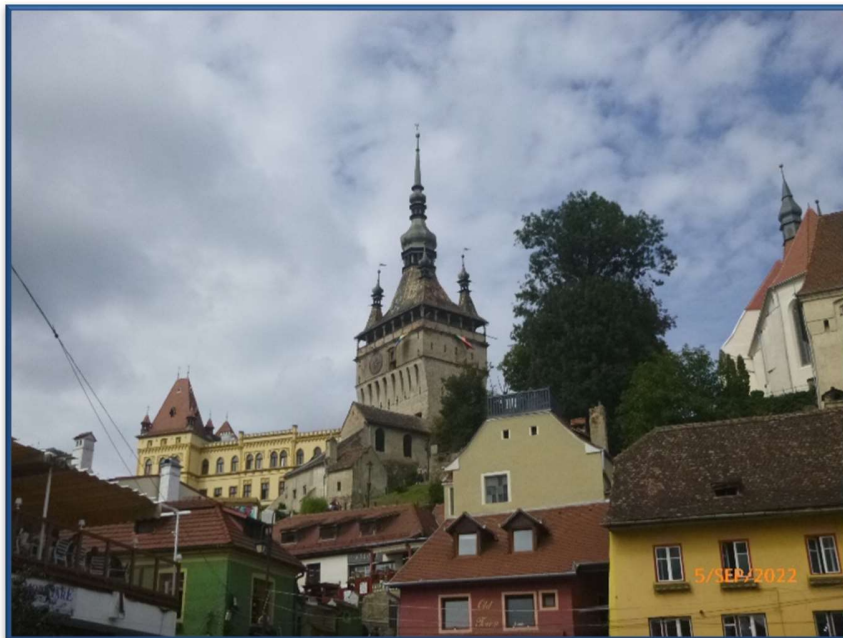


and another castle

Brasov is a pleasant city, and we walked the “narrowest street in Europe” on our way to dinner in the expansive town square. There is a bit of poetic licence going on, as the “street” is really only a cobblestone passageway between several old houses.

Sibiu was the destination next day. Weather was again cool with rain forecast but none eventuated. Roads were flat and straight compared to the previous day, and we passed through many small villages where older people as well as children waved at us as we passed through.

Lunch stop was Sighisoara, a beautiful UNESCO listed medieval fortified town. We claimed some tables in a restaurant with our helmets and jackets, wandered around the traffic-free old town, and returned for lunch. Sighisoara is also notable as the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, regarded as the inspiration for Count Dracula. This was obvious by the wares on display in the many souvenir shops. I bought a T-shirt.



Sighisoara Clock Tower

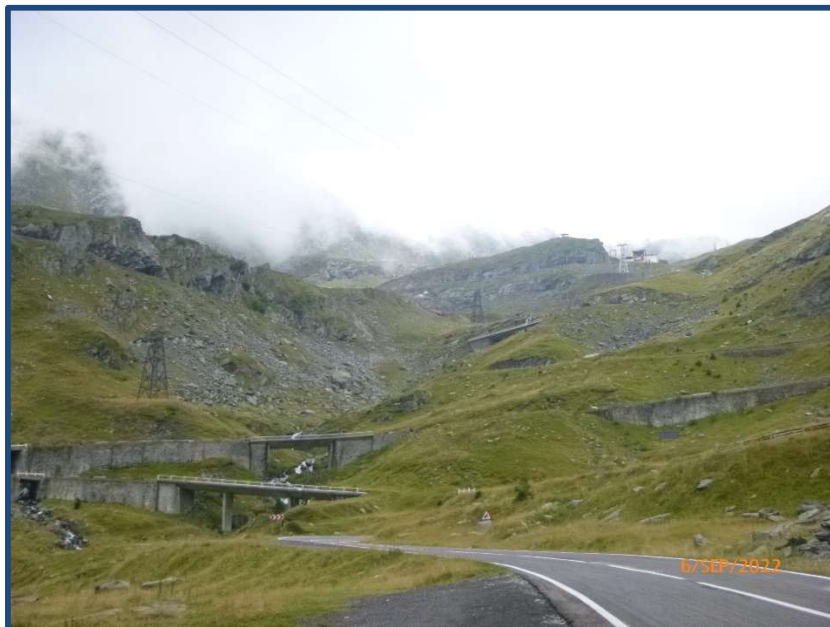
The afternoon ride was a detour through more countryside, more villages and the occasional church or fortress. Sibiu is another pleasant Transylvanian city with a high student population, and a good place to celebrate Matez’s birthday with dinner in the town square.

Meals were usually a combination of entrees selected by Mitja and Matez with input from the tour group, and mains and desserts decided individually. This worked well, the only downside being the ever-present cigarette smoke. How did we put up with it all those years ago?



Sibiu Town Square

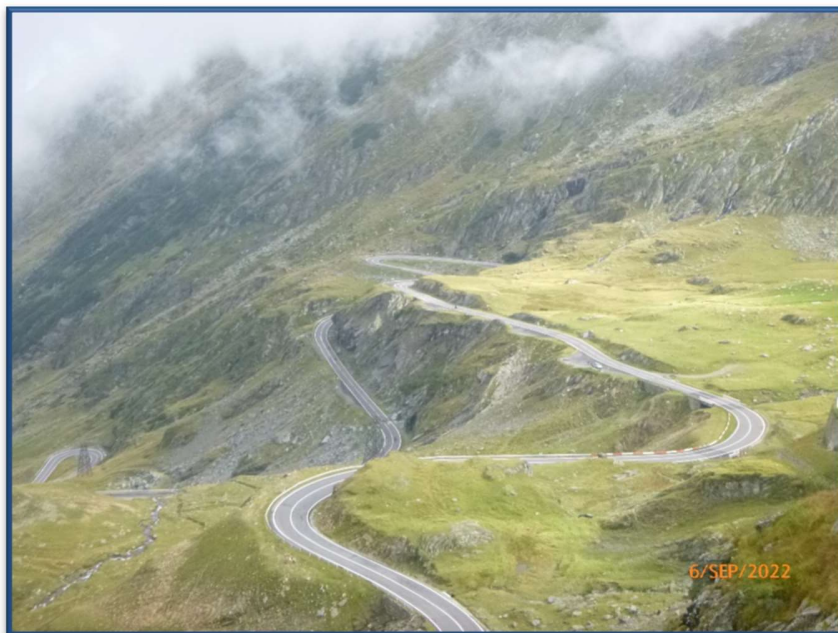
Sibiu was to be the first rest day of the tour, but with an option to ride the Transfagarasan, nobody wanted to rest. Constructed by Ceausescu in 1970 primarily as a strategic military transport route, I'm sure he never expected Jeremy Clarkson of Top Gear would christen it the "Best Road in the World".



Transfagarasan, from somewhere below



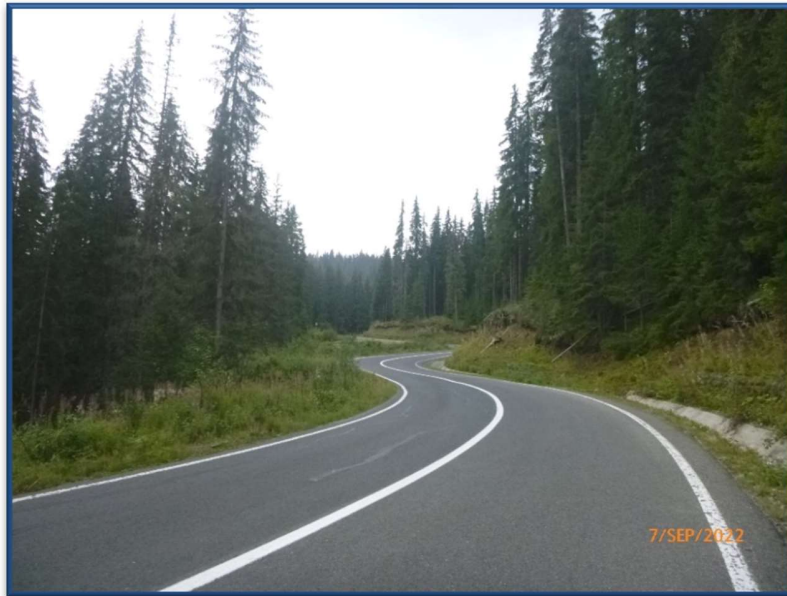
Transfagarasan, from somewhere above



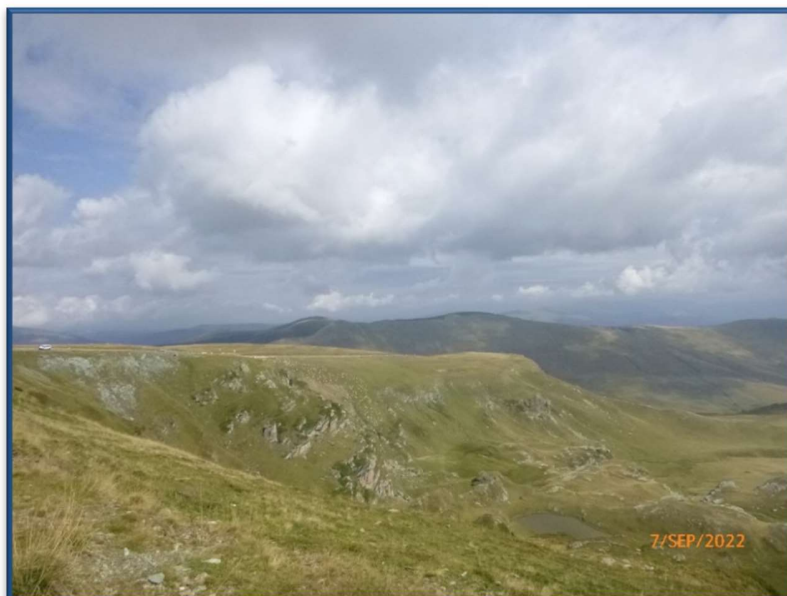
Transfagarasan, from almost anywhere

It was a long and winding ride to the top, very cold and foggy when we got there, and not unexpected, there was a lot of bikes. We passed through the tunnel at the top, rode a short distance down the other side, then turned around and went down where we came up.

Not content with riding Transfagarasan, the route next day took us via Transalpina “The King’s” Road, a great ride through forests with long sweeping bends, good road surface and little traffic, apart from a police roadblock while Red Bull filmed a shoot with open-wheeler race cars. Transalpina continued with a multiple tight u-turn climb up into the Parang Mountains, reaching far above the tree line, then the descent on the other side with more open u-turns.



Transalpina through the forests



Transalpina on the Parang Mountains



giving a helping hand at Urdele Pass, Transalpina

The afternoon ride towards Pitesti passed through more small villages, some houses literally on the edge of the road, before the traffic increased and lane splitting became the norm, arriving at our hotel around 4:30pm.



charming villages – not sure how we came to be on the wrong side of the road



caught drag racing one of many horse (and donkey) carts

Veliko Tarnovo was the destination next day and involved a lot of relatively straight roads through the Wallachian and Danubian plains. It was also meant to include a ferry across the Danube into Bulgaria, but the signs were ominous as we snuck past 30 to 40 semi-trailers stretching back along the road to the ferry terminal.

For reasons not explained (apparently neither notifications nor explanations are forthcoming in this part of the world) the ferry had been cancelled that day, and Plan B was a long detour to the nearest bridge, with another long line of trucks. This delay was due to bridge expansion joint repairs, but there was still a 30 minute wait at passport control.

A long afternoon ride ensued to make up for lost time, then a challenging ride up a narrow and bumpy cobblestone street before arriving at our hotel around 6:00pm to find Matez had cold beers waiting. Another nice touch from Adriatic Moto.



waiting for the ferry that never came

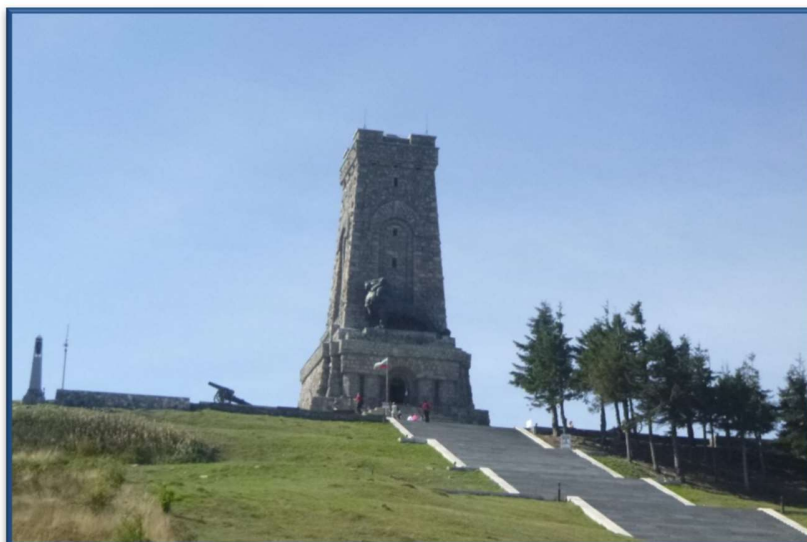


taking a short-cut to our hotel in Veliko Tarnovo

Veliko Tarnovo to Plovdiv was a shorter day, including a great ride up Shipka Pass with lots of over-reaching trees before stopping at the Shipka Memorial, dedicated to those who had lost their lives in many past battles. The pass was more open with sweeping bends on the way down the other side before the terrain became mainly flat open farmland, with some new looking light industrial plants and several old and abandoned ones approaching Plovdiv.



Shipka Pass



Shipka Memorial

We arrived at our destination around 1:00pm and had a leisurely lunch while the hotel rooms were being prepared, an even more leisurely afternoon, then taxis into the old town area for a pleasant walk around before dinner. Plovdiv is described as Bulgaria's crown, with classic architecture and Roman ruins in the middle of the old town. Taxis back to the hotel and drinks around the pool completed another good day.



Roman ruins in the centre of Plovdiv



Plovdiv

The ride to Alexandroupoli would be a long day even before taking a detour through a mountain pass, another glorious ride with high cliffs on one side and a meandering stream on the other. Being stopped by a large flock of sheep crossing the road single file wasn't in the plan, but we did take the opportunity to have a coffee break in a nearby hotel in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps the hotelier and the shepherd were in cahoots!

The day also included a 1 hour delay at the Bulgaria / Greece border in 32C heat, then a 30 minute ride to our hotel. There was still enough time for drinks by the pool before walking to dinner at a nearby seafood restaurant on the shores of the Thracian Sea. Adriatic shouted a round of ouzo, and the open restaurant shouted a good serving of mosquito repellent.



sheep don't need a pedestrian crossing

On the bikes again 8:30 next morning, with a good winding road out of town then motorways to the Turkish border. This involved 4 separate check-points, one to get out of Bulgaria, then 3 entering Turkiye to check passport, bike registration and bike insurance.

More impressive motorways took us to Gallipoli where we spent time at Anzac Cove, Lone Pine and the Ataturk Memorial. There were many tourists visiting the sites, mainly Turkish but some Aussie accents, and although I'd been there before it is still a moving experience.

We arrived at our hotel around 5:00pm, dinner was in a nice restaurant a few minutes walk from the hotel, followed by more drinks back at the hotel. Funny how habits develop.



Lone Pine Cemetery

The ride to Istanbul started out on a motorway, but as usual Mitja found a minor road (read narrow and rough surface) with patches of water after some overnight rain. This led us through some small villages to a coastal road beside the Sea of Marmara, with a coffee stop in Sarkoy where the only options were Turkish tea or Turkish coffee.

I'm not sure whether the locals chatting outside were more interested in our reaction to the strong coffee or in watching Mitja repairing a puncture in John's bike. Mitja as usual was the ultimate professional, but several reactions to the coffee were worthy of an Academy Award.

More of the coastal road followed before lunch in Tekirdag, then mainly motorways to Istanbul. An interesting feature along the motorways were smaller scale profiles of police cars placed in plain view on the median strips. Even from a distance it was obvious they weren't real, so I presume their purpose was to encourage motorists to slow down. Several had also served as target practice for graffitists.

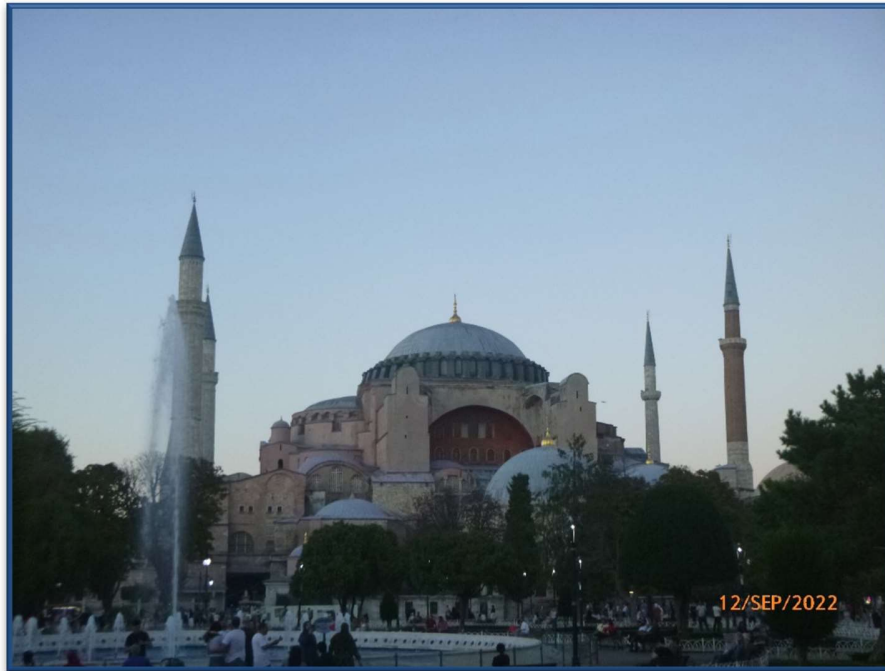


entertaining the locals during a coffee stop at Sarkoy



magnificent riding beside the Sea of Marmara

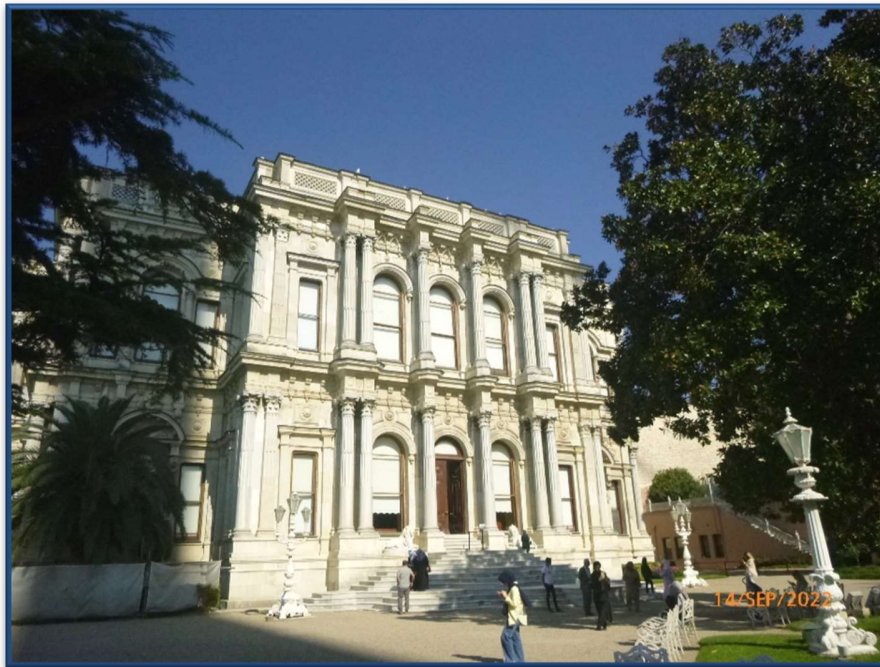
Istanbul is a mighty sprawling city of 16 million people but the ride in was surprisingly good despite the heavy traffic, arriving at the hotel around 4:00pm. Again Matez had cold beers waiting. The hotel was in Sultanahmet district near the waterfront, but close enough to the old town centre to walk up for dinner. We were a stone's throw from the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, but these would wait for the two rest days.



Hagia Sophia

I had visited these iconic sites on a previous trip and was still limping from a glancing encounter with a guard rail on the Transfagarasan, so opted out of a guided walking tour to do my own less demanding sight-seeing. On the second rest day David and I caught a hop-on hop-off bus to see sites we hadn't visited previously including Beylerbeyi Palace and Taksim Square.

We did two full circuits, gaining a better appreciation of this intriguing city and its amazing history and architectural treasures, arriving back in Sultanahmet around 6:00pm. We had dinner and drinks in the old town area, then meandered back to our hotel. Intuition told us several of our group were at the roof-top bar, and the mosque domes got bigger, the minarets became taller, and the wine improved dramatically.



Beylerbeyi Palace

Traffic getting out of Istanbul was far worse than getting in, compounded by separate breakdowns of a truck and a van, both large enough to block a lane of traffic. The delays were perplexing given 3 marked lanes for traffic could mean 5 actual lanes if bikes and scooters were counted. The road finally opened up after approx 1 hour, then onto several back roads and lunch at an out-of-the-way restaurant with no other customers.

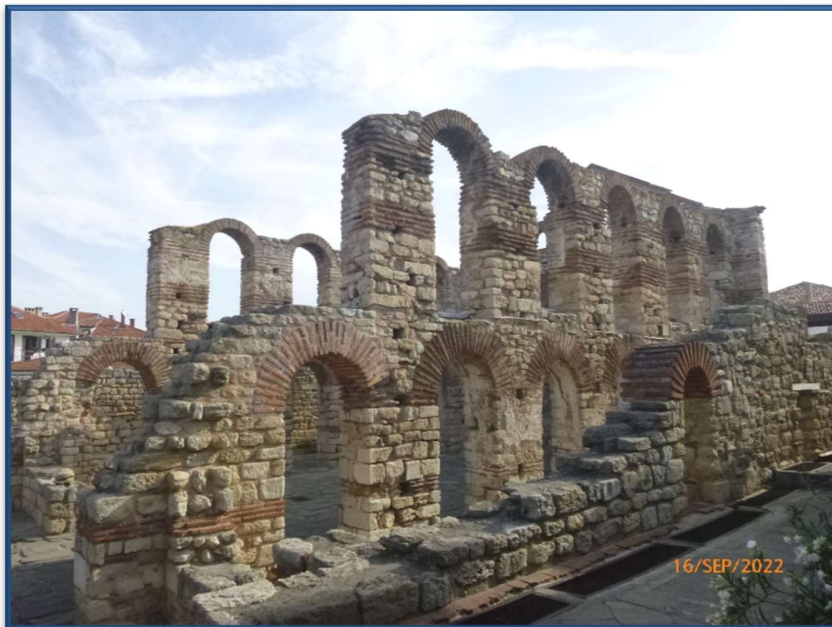
The border crossing into Bulgaria required approx 40 minutes, then good long sweeping roads in 38C temperature before approaching the Black Sea coastal town of Nesebar. Being Bulgaria, there were numerous stork nests on village power poles, and even more numerous fixed speed cameras on the village outskirts. Our hotel, the “Aphrodite Beach Hotel”, was having a Greek themed night so we dined in.

We rode to the old town next morning, located on a small island connected by a short causeway. Nesebar is one of the oldest towns in Europe and dates back to the 6th century BC, with churches dating back to the 5th century AD. After wandering around the island we set off for Kavarna, a relatively short 150km away on mainly busy roads.

With temperatures hovering around 34C, Mitja chose the beach-front Red Rock café for lunch. Unfortunately the water frontage provided little relief, but it was an interesting venue with many motorcycle and musical themes decorating the premises, and the live stage outside suggested it would surely rock at party time.

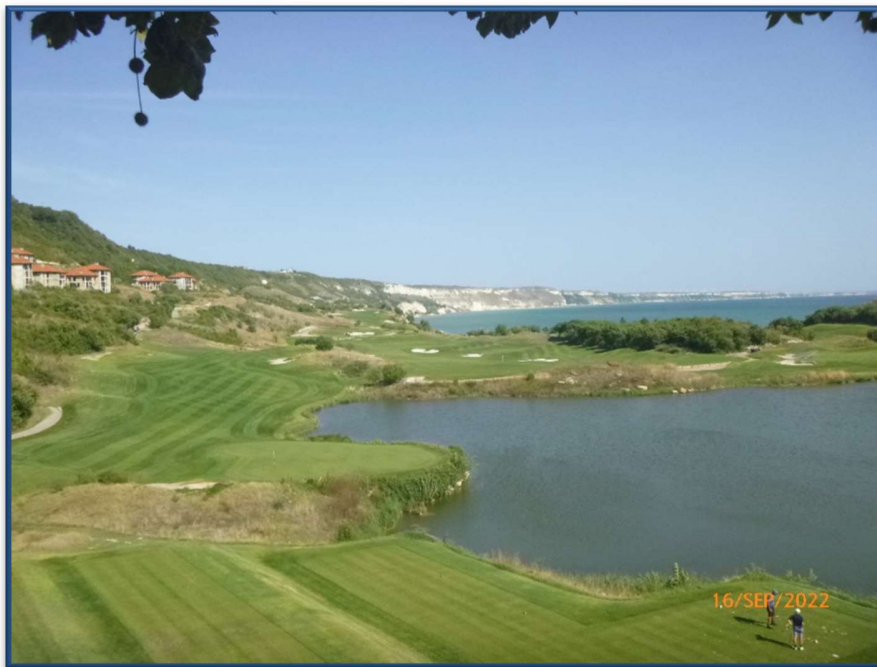


Black Sea coast from Aphrodite Beach Hotel



ruins in Nesebar

Accommodation for the night was the Gary Player designed Thracian Cliffs golf resort, claimed to be one of the top ten golf resorts in the world (their claim). Two of our party were keen golfers and played a round, while the rest sought shelter from the stifling heat.

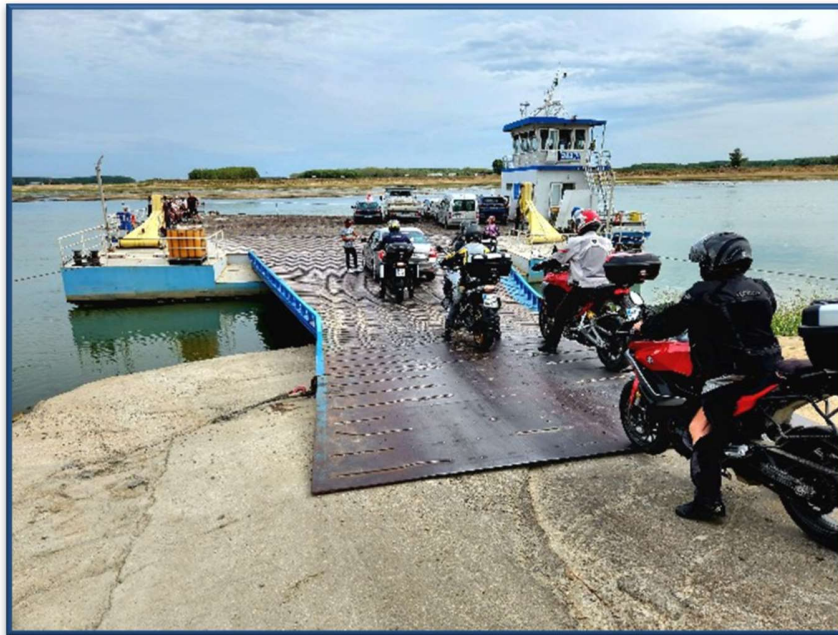


Thracian Cliffs golf resort

Final riding day included a short section following the Black Sea coastline, then onto secondary roads through vast Bulgarian farmlands. The border check-point into Romania was reasonably straight-forward compared to other crossings, and the highlight of the day was finally catching a ferry across the Danube into Romania.

More secondary roads followed with a lot of small villages but not a lot of traffic. The last 30km was a motorway into Bucharest, final refueling took longer than expected with only 2 of 12 bowsers operational, arriving at the hotel to the traditional champagne celebration.

Total distance travelled was 3,134km compared to 2,520km on the route map, highlighting the extra distance in the detours. Last Supper was in the old town, capping off another enjoyable tour. Many thanks to fellow travellers for their good company and for sharing their photos.



the ferry across the Danube



Mitja leading the champagne celebration with Matez looking on

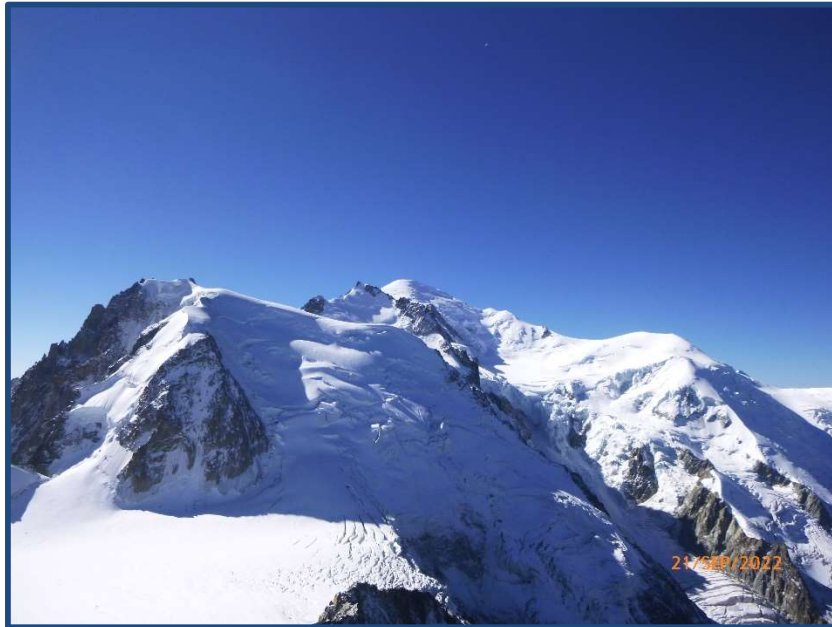
While in Europe we took the opportunity to spend a few days with David's brother in Geneva, and rode the cog railway from Montreux to Rochers de Naye with its spectacular views, the cable car from Chamonix to Aiguille du Midi with even more spectacular views to Mont Blanc, and a more sedate trip to Chateau de Savigny in France with its 9 museums including Abarth race cars, vintage bikes, fire engines, jet fighters and hovercraft.



Rochers de Naye cog railway



Aiguille du Midi cable car



with Mont Blanc in the distance



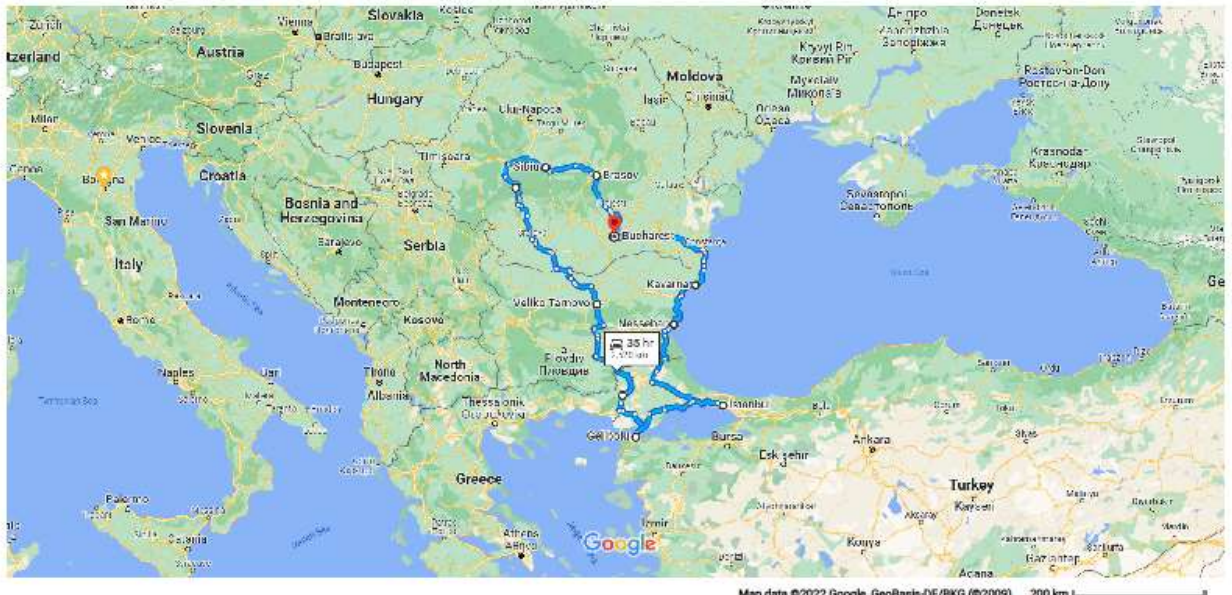
Swiss / French border passing through the centre of Hotel L'Arbezie

After the many hours spent crossing borders in Eastern Europe, usually in extreme heat in the bike gear, it was a pleasant change to have a cold beer in the Hotel L'Arbezie, casually crossing the border to go to the loo. No extra stamps in the passport, but far more civilized.

Google Maps

Bucharest, Romania to Bucharest, Romania
Romania to Istanbul Adventure

Drive 2,520 km, 35 hr



Route Map